

A Dive into the Special and Rare Collection of the Maulana Azad College Library, Kolkata

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Abstract

Maulana Azad College, Kolkata is a premier academic Institution founded in 1924 in British India to encourage Islamic Study. Its library has a rich collection of special and rare documents in different languages. This article discovers the precious rare documents of the Maulana Azad College Library, Kolkata. A few criteria have been fixed to find the rare documents as per the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Guidelines on the Selection of General Collection Materials for Transfer to Special Collections. Questionnaire, interview and the observation method were followed for data collection. This article will help to understand how rich the Maulana Azad College, Kolkata library is, in its rare documents collection and how those rare documents are being preserved. The Guidelines followed to identify the rare books in this article may also help others to get an idea about how to segregate books as rare and special from the general collection as per the mentioned guidelines.

Keywords: *Rare Books, Rare Documents, Archival documents, Maulana Azad College, Kolkata.*

1. Introduction:

On December 9, 1924, the then-Governor of Bengal, Lord Lytton, laid the cornerstone of the Islamia College, affiliated with the University of Calcutta, to advance Islamic education and general learning among the Muslim population in British India. This was made possible by the persistent efforts of A. K. Fazlul Haque, the education minister of Bengal at the time. Under the direction of Mr. A. H. Harley, the principal and former faculty member of Oriental Languages at Edinburg University in the United Kingdom, the expedition began (Maulana Azad College, n.d.).

The institution's library was established in 1926. Thus, the library is almost 98 years old and has

many rare historical and archival documents. It holds over 1,00,000 volumes of books, including books donated by Fort William College and the erstwhile Presidency College. The central library of the Maulana Azad College is well equipped with new technologies and automated with Koha library automation software, barcode, and RFID technology. The library is administered and managed by 1 Librarian, Selection Grade, WB Education Service, and has 1 library bearer, 1 library farrash and 1 Library Peon (Maulana Azad College, n.d.). The current study was taken into consideration keeping in mind that being an institution of 100 years old, its library would have many precious rare collections.

2. Literature review:

Lapkin, R. (2015) in the book review stated that “Rare Books and Special Collections” by Sidney E. Berger intends to provide an overview of the subject, presenting itself as a comprehensive resource from an individual with vast experience and expertise in the field. A beginner or someone unfamiliar with the realm of rare books and special collections will gain a wide-ranging understanding of its diversity from this text, while seasoned librarians and professionals might find it more useful for revisiting concepts or ideas learned during their education rather than as a definitive reference. Meehan, B. (2015) expresses that from the ancient cuneiform and coins to manuscripts, prints, photographs, and maps, rare books and special collections departments serve as key repositories for vital printed and manuscript materials and the artefacts. Charged with the duty of safeguarding historical and cultural records, these institutions provide access to millions of source documents. Germek, G. P. (2016) outlined approaches for small academic libraries, which typically focus their instructional activities on information literacy, to broaden their educational initiatives through book history instruction by establishing a modest yet effective rare books collection used exclusively for teaching purposes. Araújo, D. M. P., & Reis, A. S. D. (2017) discussed bibliophilia in Europe, particularly from the modern era onward, and the importance of specialized bibliographies in rare books in the development of private libraries. Kovalechuk (2023) surveyed the reference collections especially the encyclopedias and lexicons from the 15th to 18th centuries available in the Vernadsky National Library of Ukraine. The study was done mainly to highlight the forgotten information treasures in the form of reference materials. Hertenstein (2023) surveyed 68 programs of the LIS under the American Library Association and emphasized the need of skilled cataloguers for rare and special documents. He

also expressed that the more languages known, the more it will be good for the library professionals. Weissman (2023) opined to use of electrochromic glazing (electrically tint-able glass) for quality reading with better visual experiences for the rare documents. Magnusson & Cleaver (2022) examined the trade in special and rare documents between Britain and America during the 'Golden Age' of collecting to compare the reality of the book trade to assess its effect on cultural institutions. Two distinct picture albums that show Sub-Carpathian Rus' between 1919 and 1923 are described in Kasinec's brief comment (Kasinec, 2022).

Many other articles on rare documents are available. But no particular article found on the special documents of the Maulana Azad College Library which is going to be almost a hundred years old within a few more years. Therefore, the study was considered to unfold the treasure available in the collection of the Maulana Azad College Library, Kolkata and categorise them according to “Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Guidelines, 2016” on the Selection of General Collection Materials for Transfer to Special Collections”. (Rare Books and Manuscripts Section, Association of College and Research Libraries, 2016).

3. Objectives:

The study aims to find out rare documents of the 98 years old college with the following objectives:

- To find out what kind of rare documents are available?
- To find out how they can be categorised?
- To find out the different languages covered by this rare collection.
- To find out how these rare documents are preserved?

4. Methodology:

As per the “Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Guidelines, 2016” on the Selection of General Collection Materials for Transfer to Special Collections”, rare documents are selected based on any one or combinations of the following six broadly defined criteria:

- 1) Market value
- 2) Rarity and scarcity
- 3) Date and place of publication
- 4) Physical and intrinsic characteristics
- 5) Bibliographic and research value (historical, cultural or intellectual interest) and
- 6) Condition.

The data regarding the books which may be considered as rare documents as per aforementioned criteria were collected from the library of the Maulana Azad College, Kolkata. A structured questionnaire was prepared and the observation method was also followed to collect data about the rare books collection and how the rare documents are preserved for posterity. Contents of books were studied to identify their importance whenever needed so that they can be categorised easily.

5. Findings and Discussions:

Data obtained after the survey, observation and interview method, has been analysed and discussed here.

Maulana Azad College Library has nearly 5000 rare documents including books and manuscripts. Special and rare books and manuscripts are kept in a separate room.

a) Availability of the rare documents in different languages

The survey shows the Maulana Azad College Library, Kolkata has rare collection of documents (books and manuscripts) in Persian, Pushto, English, Arabic, Bengali, French and Urdu languages.

Figure 1 shows that Manuscripts available are mostly in Persian language. Total 110 manuscripts are available. Out of them, 78 is in Persian, 20 in Urdu, 10 in Arabic and two in other languages.

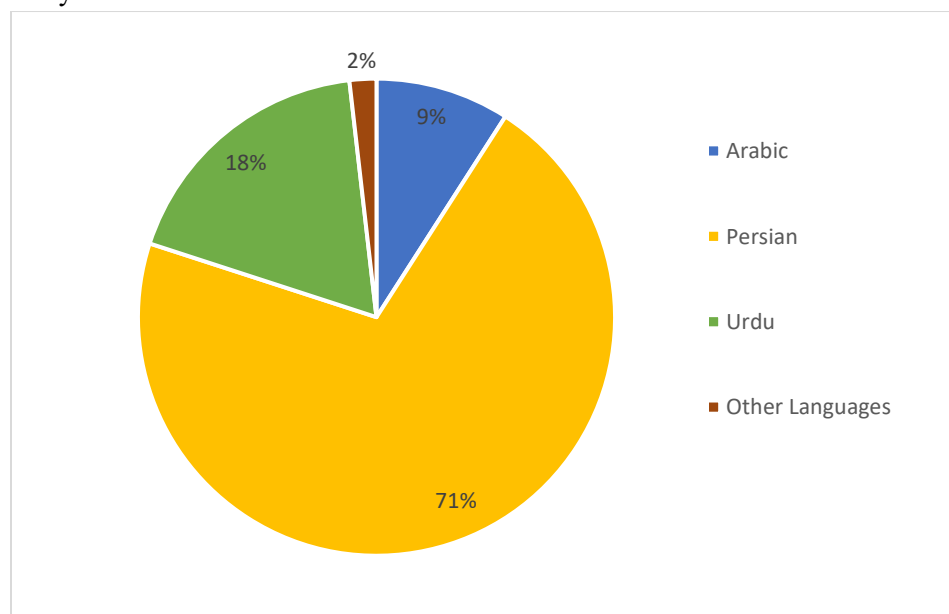


Figure 1 Language-Wise Distribution of Manuscripts

b) A few Examples of the Rare documents available in different Languages

Language	Year	Country	Title of the rare document	Author
Persian	1589	India	Ain-i-Akbari (Manuscript)	Abul Fazl
	1854	India	KashShafiSalat-al-funun	
	1859	India	Alinisf-Althani	Abil Qasim
	1890	India	The Massiur-ul-Umara	Samsad-ud-daula Shah Nawaz Khan
Pushto	1860	India	Gulshan-i-Roh	Ed. H. G. Raverty
English	1786	India	Hindustani Dictionary	John Gilchrist
	1819	India	Travels in various countries of the East	William Ousley Knight
	1824	India	Collection of proverbs and proverbial phrases in the Persian and Hindustanee language	Thomas Roebuck
	1839	India	Alif Laila Part I-IV	
	1843	Great Britain	Biographical Dictionary	
	1848	India	Karnama-i-Hyderi	
	1854	India	KashShafiSalat	
	1870	India	Record of the expedition to Abyssinia	Trevenen J. Holland
	1877	Britain	Across Africa	Verney Lovett Cameron
	1877	India	Bibliotheca Indica, a collection of oriental works	Asiatic Society of Bengal
Arabic	1868	Egypt	Kitab-al-Aghani	Abu-al-Faraj-al-Isfahani
	1871	India	Mashari-ul-Maqairi	Md. Shaqui Mustad Khan
	1899	India	Al Farooq Ani-Azalhadia	Samsul Alam Mualana Shibli Naumani
	1900	Egypt	Addur-Lawama	Md. Amin-al-khanzi-al-Qulla
	1910	Egypt	Al-Mustatraf	Al-Ahmad-Al-Shisi

	1914	Egypt	Al-Hujjaj Bin Muslim-al-Qusairi-al-Naysaburi	Imam Abu al-Hussain Muslim
Bengali	1917	India	Prithviraj	Jogindranath Basu
	1922	India	Socretes o Greek Sabhyata Vol1 and Vol2	University of Calcutta
French	1839-1847	Paris	Histoire de la Hindouie et Hindoustanee	M. Garcin De Tassy and Joseph Heliodore Sagesse
	1859	Kolkata	Alnisf-Althani	Abi Qasim
Urdu	1905	Lahore	Eighth Urdu Reader	Education Dept. Punjab
	1912	Kolkata	Kashful Hazabi Al-Istari	Maulana Syed Izaz Hussain Al Naisuburi Alkanturi
	1924	Allahabad	Qasayed-e-Zauq	Khan Bahadur Sheikh Mohammad Ibrahim Zauq
	1924		Bang-e-Dara	Muhammad Iqbal
	1931	India	Ghaniat-ul-Talebin	Sheikh Abdul Qadir Gilani
	1931	Egypt	Tareekh-e-Baghdadi	Abu-Bakr-Ahmed-Bin-Ali-Alkhatib-Al-Baghdadi
	1935	Allahabad	Jawahar-e-Sukhan	Hindustani Academy

Table 1 A Few Rare Documents of Different Languages

The Table 1 shows language-wise a few details of the documents. Ain-i-Akbari, Persian Manuscript of 1589 is the oldest rare document available in the Maulana Azad Library.

c) Categorisation of the rare documents after the survey, as per ACRL Guidelines

The very important and rare documents were categorised on eight (o6) different criteria as per the “Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Guidelines, 2016”.

Criterion 1- Market Value

In this category, documents consistently valued at Rs.2000 or above according to noteworthy rare and archival book traders were placed. Since the value fluctuates based on the market, economic value should not be the single criterion for adding a document to the rare document collection. The threshold cost should be revised sporadically.

A few mentionable documents available in this category:

- Travels in various countries of the East Vol.1, 2 & 3/ Written by Sir

- William Owsley in 1819CE pub. Rodwell and Martin
- Collection of Proverbs and Proverbial phrases in the Persian and Hindustanee languages/ Written by Thomas Roebuck, in 1824CE, Pub. Fort William College Press,
- Histoire de la litterature hindouie hindoustani/ Written by M. Garcin De Tassy, Joseph Heliodore Sage, 1839-1847CE printed in Paris

Criterion 2- Rarity and scarcity

This criterion includes documents not found in large numbers, and insufficient for the need or the demand. Limited edition and small press books available in few copies. Some include print copies which will never be printed again but the later editions will be available in digital format.

A few mentionable documents available in this category:

- Limited edition titles (usually 500 copies or less) of special interest-
- History of the Damishq City (Damascus)/Written by Abil Qasim, Ali-Bin-Hibbatullah-bin-Abdullah-Alshafi in 1946CE in Damascus.

Criterion 3- Date and place of publication

Sometimes date and time become the essential criteria for the selection of special rare materials concerning the other conditions too.

A few mentionable documents available in this category:

a) Documents printed before Independence i.e. before 1947

- Money/ Written by Karl Helfferich and translated by Louis Infield in 1927CE
- History of Urdu Literature/ Written by Ram Babu Saxena 1927CE
- Biographical Dictionary, 1843CE; Great Britain
- b) **Documents of the countries of Middle-East Asia and North Africa**
- Addur-Lawama by Md. Amin-al-khanzi-al-Qulla in 1900 from Egypt,
- Al-Mustatraf by Al-Ahmad-Al-Shisi in 1910CE from Egypt,
- Al-Hujjaj Bin Muslim-al-Qusairi-al-Naysaburi by Imam Abu al-Hussain Muslim in 1914CE from Egypt,
- Tareekh-e-Baghdadi by Abu-Bakr-Ahmed-Bin-Ali-Alkhatib-Al-Baghdadi 1931CE from Egypt

Criterion 4- Physical and intrinsic characteristics

This criterion covers documents with fold-outs, original artistic work or photographs, moveable parts, decorated end-papers, unbound plates, dust jackets, vellum bindings, extra-illustrated books and hand-created compiling, made by unusual material, in non-standard sizes or shapes, scrapbooks, photograph albums, and manuscript (handwritten/typed) materials, Broadsides, posters, and printed ephemera, books and other materials with significant evidence of association (bookplates/ marginalia/ inscriptions).

A few mentionable documents available in this category:

- Persian Masnavi (Bahramnama)/ Written by Maulana Nizami Gajnavi. It is the original hand-written manuscript of the poet which he had

- written during the reign of Mughal emperor Shah Jahan.
- Ain-i-Akbari/ Written by Abul Fazl Ibu Mubarak during Akbar's reign, copy had a Golden page leaf in the beginning and only of the 50 handwritten manuscripts.

Criterion 5- Bibliographic and research value (historical, cultural or intellectual interest)

This criterion includes secondary sources like reference works and periodicals along

with Federal, state, and local government documents with growing research and market value. Reports of scientific expeditions/discoveries, government publications with maps or plates, ethnographic reports, and documents created during major historical events.

Repressed, censored or challenged books; documents of a seminal nature or importance to a specific field of study or genre of literature; and materials produced for use by a private group with no subsequent public distribution may be also included in this category.



Figure 2 Golden water imprint on the very first page of the manuscript



Figure 3 Ain-i-Akbari by Abul Fazl (1589) in Persian language.-Oldest manuscript available in the library of Maulana Azad College, Kolkata.



Figure 4 Nisab-i-sabiyan: A Collection of the Persian Poetry

A few mentionable documents available in this category:

Confederate imprints, 1861-1945

- The Present Economic Revolution in the United States/ Written by Thomas Nixon Carver in 1926CE in USA
- A concordance to the English poems of John Donne/ Written by Homer Carol Combs and Zay Rusk Sullens in 1940CE, Chicago
- Punishment and social structure/ Written by George Ruscha and Otto Kirchheimer with a forward by Thorsten Selin in 1939CE from Columbia University Press

Documents of famous printers

- Vestiges of Old Madras 1640-1800 Vol.1 & Vol.2/ Written by Henry Davison Love in 1913CE by Govt. Of India, London
- Tareekh-E-Baghdadi/ Written by Abu-Bakr-Ahmed-Bin-Ali-Alkhatib-Al-Baghdadi in 1931CE from Alsada Press, Egypt
- The constitution of all countries Vol. 1. To Vol. 3/ Collected by His Majesty's Stationary Office, The British Empire 1938CE
- Hindustani Dictionary/ Written by John Gilchrist in 1786CE from East India Company press
- Alif-Laila Part I-IV/ Published in 1839CE from Govt. of India press.

Gifted documents from Famous Institutions like Fort William College and erstwhile Presidency College (signed by author, artist)

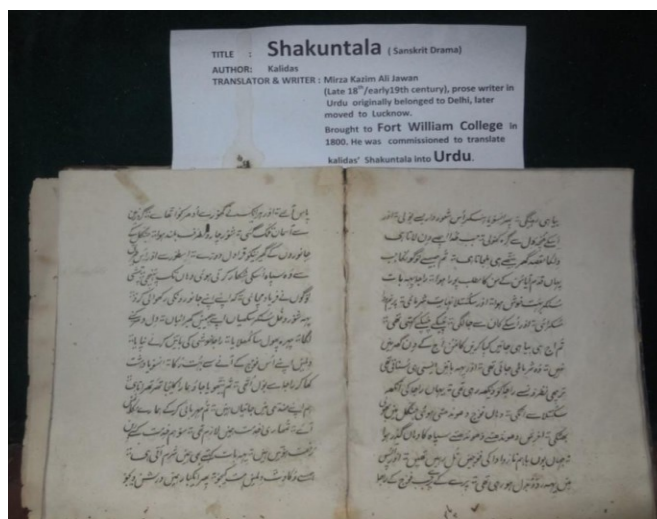


Figure 5 A translated book of Kalida’s Shakuntala in Urdu gifted by the Fort William College

Criterion 6- Condition

Any document which is very poor in physical condition or very old in nature should not be treated as rare based on this one criterion. The contents and other conditions discussed earlier may also be taken into consideration along with the physical condition of the documents before treating them as rare or special.

The Maulana Azad College Library is having near about 5000 books that are old in nature and they are also having archival values.

d) Preservation and Conservation of rare documents

Maintenance of the Rare Document section in the Library is very challenging work. It is just like treating different patients by a doctor for different ailments. Rare documents face the different hurdles in their lifetime and are prone to the perils that attack them easily. Some of them are improper exposure to light and temperature, humidity, dust and dirt, document damaging insects and worms like termites, silverfish, bookworms, booklice, warps, larva of moths etc., mishandling by the users or staff.

The measures that are being followed in the Central Library of Maulana Azad College to preserve the rare documents are as follows:



Figure 6 A Fumigation Chamber available in the library

1. **Fumigation:** This process is followed to control the damage by fungus and insects. There is a specific almirah-type chamber, known as Fumigation Chamber, for the fulfilment of this process. Damaged documents are placed in this chamber and specific quantity of chemicals are being used after evaluating the quality and quantity of damage. Mainly Thymol and Formaldehyde are used to treat the documents. Before initiation of the process, documents are selected and kept in light for the first day and then placed inside the chamber the next day.

For this, the tissue paper gets attached to the page of the document. The opposite side of the document is also been covered in the same way. After the attachment the page is then placed on a smooth surface and something heavy is placed on the paper.

3. **Pest Control treatment:** Regular pest control treatment of special and rare documents is being done to protect them from damage.

2. **Lamination:** This process is followed to join the torn pages of the documents. It is a very time-consuming, laborious and expensive process. A special type of paper named Tissue paper or Glaslyn paper is generally used in this method. The tissue paper is placed on the page and Acetone is applied with the clean cloth from the middle of the page to the side.

Suggestions:

The library of the Maulana Azad College is very well maintained and has introduced many updated facilities for its users with the help of ICT. The rare and special collections which have been kept separately in a room need timely preservation and conservation and more skilled manpower is required for the same along with adequate financial provision.

Digitisation of rare and special documents may be done. But at the same time, physical restoration is also of utmost importance as the physical documents contain many important features - made up of special material which may serve in the historical and archival study or research work. One policy may be framed to find out and preserve the special and rare documents and make them available to posterity.

Conclusion:

The Library of Maulana Azad College is a very rich library with rare documents. The oldest document available is Ain-i-Akbari by Abul Fazl published in 1589 in Persian language. Other than this, there are many other documents with publication years ranging between 1700 and 1900. The document needs continuous preservation and conservation initiatives. Manpower constraints are one of the problems in preserving these rare documents. This library is a hub of archival and historical knowledge specifically for the Islamic community though other communities may also find it helpful. Proper fund allocation and sufficient manpower is required for the preservation of such rarities.

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